

Why Cafeteria-Style Service is Trending

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If there's one place every American diner over the age of 5 has eaten, it's a cafeteria. Ask them if they're particularly happy with that experience, however, and the answer is probably no. That's because the school, hospital, and college-campus cafeterias of old have earned a reputation for serving low-quality food lacking in freshness and innovation.

"The old buffet line or cafeteria line was a way to feed people really fast without considering what they were feeding people," says Jason Anello, vice president of marketing for gluten-free, cafeteria-style concept The Little Beet. "The chefs asked, 'What can we feed people en masse that's fast and cost-effective?'"

But now a handful of better-for-you brands like The Little Beet are trying to shed the negative connotation that comes with cafeteria-style service, bringing the format back to life in a more modern and healthful way. California-style eatery Lemonade, for example, allows guests to create their own meals from a variety of scratch-made vegan, vegetarian, and protein-based options, all laid out in a cafeteria-inspired line.

Diners can choose from pre-crafted plates—such as the Big Chill, featuring citrus salmon and a choice of two salads—or from a menu of 50 à la carte items. These items include an array of marketplace salads, toasted sandwiches, braised proteins, vegetable-based dishes, and, yes, a lineup of lemonades.

"While some concepts allow you to choose all of the ingredients, our items are a choice of à la carte items that have been carefully developed, selected, and tasted," CEO Larry Kurzweil says. "I think when people can go up and down a line and pick and choose and go back for more, that's very empowering."

While The Little Beet has always had a make-your-own meal approach, the brand updated its service model last April to feature a more cafeteria-style format. Rather than guests ordering at the head of the line, they're now able to craft their meals as they move down the line—starting with grains and vegetables, moving on to proteins as an accompaniment, then finishing up with a range of sauces, spreads, and toppings.

Modern concepts are also separating themselves from the cafeterias of the past by creating spaces that awaken the senses. "You don't smell those steamed vegetables that were overcooked and just sitting there under heat lamps," says Melissa Abbott, vice president of culinary insights at Hartman Group, a food and beverage consulting firm. "It's fresh, and ... you can really get a sense that there's an interest in food culture happening."

At Lemonade, Kurzweil makes sure each of its food marketplaces provides guests with a bright, colorful, and welcoming atmosphere that starts the moment guests look inside the restaurant, as opposed to when they get to the line.

Abbott says the variety of the food adds yet another layer to the better-for-you story. "The idea of all the colors and all of the vibrancy is very contemporary and very modern," she adds. "It actually makes you feel better by being surrounded by all these brightly colored foods and vegetables."

Not only are customization, engagement, and atmosphere key to shedding cafeterias' bad rap, but transparency is also a crucial way to improve customer perception of this service style. That's why fine-fast eatery Dig Inn designs its restaurants around open kitchens, where diners can see items being prepared, cooked, placed directly on the line, and served fresh to each guest. "If food was just coming out from behind a closed door and our guests were not able to see what we were doing, the food may resonate, but it might not resonate as much," says culinary director Matt Weingarten.

Because guests can see these healthful dishes in such a transparent way, today's cafeteria-style brands are careful to keep their items appetizing. This often means cooking in small batches, as well as continually refreshing product to maintain a more elevated appearance. Dig Inn's "cook per person" approach, for example, means it only cooks six pieces of salmon at a time.

Dig Inn uses that volume to its advantage, in that it allows for the food to always be fresh, Weingarten says. While customers are in line, they can see staff prepping the salmon or pulling broccoli out of the oven and dressing it with olive oil and lemon. And though today's diners are often in a hurry, Weingarten says, they don't mind a short wait for freshly prepared dishes.

While this small-batch approach is critical to maintaining the appearance of freshness and health, it's a far more challenging task when business slows down.

"When you have a line out the door and you're rocking through it, it's great. But those hours where people aren't really eating lunch and it's not yet dinner, maintaining a beautiful display is challenging because you don't have this continual refresh," says Gabe Kennedy, culinary director at The Little Beet.

To combat this issue, he adds, restaurants either have to shrink portion sizes and display the items in smaller batches or risk items deteriorating and then refreshing them. With the latter, the product is either logged as waste or eaten by the staff.

Maintaining engagement is another challenge The Little Beet has faced since switching service formats, Anello says.

"At peak times, there's a lot of meals being made," he adds. "Our training team has worked very hard to figure out what is the optimal way to do that, where you're getting the food through fast, you're getting the food accurately to the guest, and you're engaging with that guest."